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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides suggestions for reassessing, modifying, and arranging child care center environments to best serve the needs of children and staff. The booklet notes that a well-planned environment can provide young children with appropriate and challenging learning experiences within a consistent and secure setting. Such an environment also allows staff to become involved in meaningful, intimate interactions with children by reducing the time required for organizing and reorganizing furniture, rooms, and equipment. The booklet recommends that the ideal center include distinct areas for: (1) active physical play; (2) manipulative play; (3) messy and creative play; (4) kitchen or dramatic play; (5) quiet play, music, and storytelling; (6) personal storage; (7) curiosity and sensory activities; (8) outside world or real life experiences; (9) seclusion; (10) eating; (11) diaper changing and toilets; (12) sleep; and (13) dressing and undressing. Sample floor plans are provided. Contains 22 references. (MDM)

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# PLANNING APPROPRIATE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN UNDER THREE

LINDA HARRISON

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**Photographs:** Supplied by Linda Harrison

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# PLANNING APPROPRIATE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN UNDER THREE

LINDA HARRISON

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The writing of this booklet would not have been possible without the help and interest of the long day care centre directors and staff who welcomed me into their centres. In particular, I wish to thank staff at Cessnock, Maitland, Kurri Kurri, Singleton, Hamilton, and the Magic Pudding Child Care Centres in New South Wales, and the Harvard Medical Area Infant-Toddler Centre in Boston, USA.

## INTRODUCTION

When you think of running a child care centre, do you take "running" literally?

When sitting down with a toddler to read a story or play a game, do you begin to feel uncomfortable, thinking you should be doing something else?

Do you jump up to help every time another staff member begins to clean up equipment, or set up for meals or sleeptime?

Do you find you think more about what you have to do next, rather than what teaching you could be doing now?

If the answer to any of these questions is 'yes', then read on. This booklet is designed to reassure you that the role, and the right, of child care staff working with infants and toddlers **is** to be relaxed, to be able to sit and talk with young children, to interact and to teach at all possible opportunities. The suggestions provided for reassessing, modifying and arranging the child care environment should help staff to do just that.

## QUALITY CARE = QUALITY TIME

In recent years we have seen much debate on the question of quality care, particularly the provision of quality care for children under three in centre-based settings. There have been many attempts to define the criteria necessary for good quality care, and to encourage staff to evaluate the quality of the programmes they provide. These instruments, notably the US National Association for the Education of Young Children's (1985) Accreditation schedule, the Australian Early Childhood Association's (1987) Quality in Long Day Care survey, and Harms, Cryer and Clifford's (1986) Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale, have made a very valuable contribution to the field of early childhood education. However, their usefulness for staff working within the day-to-day demands of child care is less clear. In reality, child care staff are often too busy to be able to find the time to implement such a systematic and comprehensive scrutiny of their service.

How can we go about finding a reasonable way to determine quality within child care centres? There is perhaps one overall criterion or question which comes to mind when we think of how to evaluate the standard of care provided for infants and toddlers. The question: "Would you place your child in this centre?", posed by Lilian Katz (1989), seems to sum up the problem.

When we think of placing our babies and toddlers in child care, what is it that we look for? Research findings have tended to support our intuitive tendency to look first and foremost to the quality of the caregivers. Will the staff nurture, support, direct, extend, and love our children as much as we do? Will they tell us about our child? Will they help us cope with the loss of those hours of daily separation? And will they support us as parents and our child's primary caregivers? Quality care is about these very qualities that we seek in the caregiver, and in his or her interaction with children and parents. This view is supported by Jim Greenman who has written that "the most important ingredient in good care for babies is the

child's caregiver" (Greenman, 1988: 52), and Pam Schurch who writes: "loved adults are the key to what under threes learn and how they respond to experiences" (Schurch, 1988: 29).

"Put your finger on your cheek, leave it there about a week" — positive interaction between caregiver and child is the key to good quality child care.

*(Magic Pudding Child Care Centre)*

Clearly, caregiver-child interaction is basic to the provision of quality care, but what is also clear is that this interaction depends on the extent to which the caregiver can be with the children. It depends on the time available for positive interaction. Janet Gonzales-Mena argues that much of a child's time with the caregiver should aim to be "quality time". Quality time, she writes, is when "each person is fully present with the other, giving full attention, responding. Giving of one's time in this way is giving of one's self." (Gonzales-Mena, 1979: 53). In other words,

> **the question of how to achieve quality care becomes, how do we plan for and provide quality time?**

How, then, can we allow carers to be individually attuned to the children, to slow down to the pace of an emergent walker or to converse with a child just beginning to talk? How can we ensure that quality time occurs regularly and consistently throughout the day? Here Greenman gives us an answer in his "First Paradox of Infant Toddler Programs". His assertion is that while the caregiver is the most important ingredient of good child care, it is the environment that is more likely to distinguish between high and low quality child care programmes (Greenman, 1988: 53).

> **A well-planned environment can offer two essential contributions to quality care. First, it can provide children with appropriate and challenging learning experiences within a consistent and secure setting. Second, it allows staff greater opportunity to become involved in meaningful, intimate interactions with children by reducing the time required for organising and reorganising the furniture, the room and the equipment.**

These two areas, appropriate learning experiences for children 0 to 3, and effective organisation of equipment and space, will form the basis for the information provided in this booklet. A third section will bring these two facets of quality care together by describing and illustrating how a group of child care staff have achieved an effective, high quality environment for toddlers.

## WHAT ARE APPROPRIATE LEARNING EXPERIENCES FOR CHILDREN UNDER THREE?

Any attempt to provide quality learning experiences for children under three must begin from the starting point of the child. There are now a number of excellent publications which have contributed to our understanding of infants and toddlers, and how to plan appropriate programmes and environments for this age group. Each of these works presents a slightly different perspective on the child under three: some describe the unique needs of the developing 0 to 3 year old and how environments can best meet these needs (Sebastian, 1988; Kellett, 1984; Cataldo, 1981); others have defined a philosophy of caregiving with identified age-specific objectives for under-threes (Schurch, 1988; Gonzales-Mena and Eyer, 1980); and a third approach has been to look at the characteristics of infant and toddler play, and design learning environments around these recognisable behaviours (Patterson, 1988; Sponseller, 1974).

All of these approaches emphasise that the under-threes have unique characteristics, behave in particular ways, and have specialised needs. It is also clear from these writings that the one distinct quality or developmental task of these years is the child's establishment of a sense of self. Child care providers must recognise this essential nature of the under-threes and design learning environments which facilitate the achievement of this goal.

*(Maitland Child Care Centre)*

What children in care must experience in developing a sense of self, is **consistency**, which provides them with security, an understandable world, recognisable and maintained limits, and develops trust, confidence and self-control, and **challenge**, through which they assert their independence, develop autonomy, and move into an extended social and cognitive world. The notion of these opposites — **consistency and challenge** — encapsulates the delicate balance that marks children's progression through infancy to toddlerhood. The environment must not only recognise and provide for these two opposite needs in

the developing personality, but must be flexible enough to respond to the varying emphases of each side of the balance within the individual child.
child.

## Consistency: The 'Built-In' Curriculum

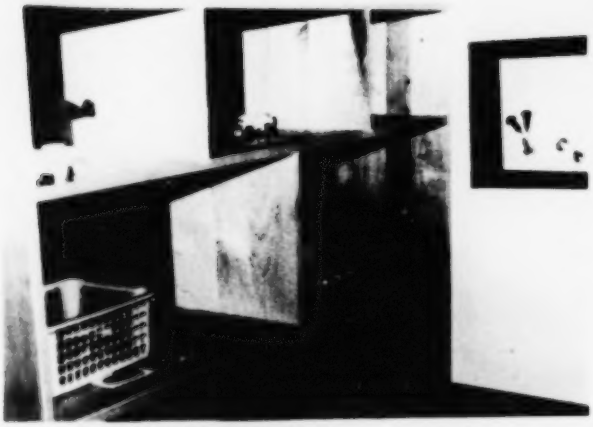
Consistency, in child care for under-threes, is usually directed at the need for a stable, reliable group of caregivers with whom the child can form secure relationships. Consistency is also required in the physical environment where, as discussed by Elizabeth Dimond, the term "implies an identifiable space whose parameters are regular, dependable and comfortable" (Dimond, 1979: 27).

For very young children, an **"identifiable space"** must include familiar places and patterns known to the child in the home. The child care environment should not be "something wildly different" from the everyday quality of a home setting (Dimond, 1979: 28). It should have the same comfort, interest, security, familiarity, and intrigue. It should have the same open spaces and hideaway places, the same changes in floor surfaces, the same sort of furniture to hang on to, crawl into, and climb on. But, in addition, it should be carefully designed to ensure children's safety, and as such, it should not require the constant eye of an adult. As at home, there should be times when children are left to their own devices, to be watchful, to explore freely, and to make choices for themselves.

A child derives security from an environment which is **regular, predictable and constant** (Gerber, 1979). The child care setting should provide defined areas for certain activities and certain types of play. Active play areas should be clearly separated from quiet areas, table activities from floor play, climbing areas from dramatic play settings. As much as possible, these areas should be permanent, allowing the child to learn through familiarity and repetition where to go for jumping, or for storytime, or for block building.

A young child learns from an environment which is **dependable, reliable, and has a clear sense of order**. To achieve this, staff must determine achievable rules and set clear limits, based on realistic expectations and knowledge of infant-toddler behaviour. These rules must be maintained by regular explanation, and taught both verbally and non-verbally. For example, a rule that books must stay in the quiet area is best maintained by physically taking the child to return a book while saying "this is where the books belong". Doing it himself/herself is a more effective learning experience for the child than having staff pick the book up and return it to the book area after it's been left somewhere. Children learn, through repeated explanation and through **doing**, the rules and the structure of the centre. These are best reinforced by the establishment of a regular, ordered environment. Children should also be invited to help maintain this order, and to understand it. Putting away toys is a major part of the child care day, and staff should try to slow down the process to give enough time for children to become involved. This can be helped by storing equipment in clearly labelled containers which identify where items are to be packed away. In this way children learn that careful replacement is as meaningful as selecting and using the equipment or materials.

Shelves should offer a limited range of interesting items to select, in clearly labelled containers.



*(Bright Horizons, Boston)*

An environment which is **comfortable** for young children is one which recognises their needs and their unique, sensory way of learning. Although toddlers will learn, for example, while seated at tables, they are more comfortable in themselves when able to climb in and over structures, sit on a lap, or curl up in a cushion. As Greenman has pointed out, "a soft, responsive, physical environment reaches out to children. It helps children to feel more secure, enabling them to venture out and explore the world. Most importantly, it allows children to make their presence felt, to leave an imprint on the world." (Greenman, 1988: 74).

## Challenge — Stepping Forward to Autonomy

Elizabeth Dimond has suggested that the most accurate description of the infant and toddler's development is that of "two steps forward, one step back". She argues that within a consistent, predictable, yet challenging environment, children will be able to move forward towards "increasing diversity, change and non-predictability, and then back again". This "interplay of regression and growth", she states, is vital to the child's development of autonomy and independence (Dimond, 1979: 27, 28).

The child care environment for the under-threes must recognise this "two steps forward, one step back" mode of learning, and provide the opportunity for children to seek their own challenges. The challenging environment is one which is flexible and responsive to the individual's need to push forward and retreat. Cognitively, the child needs novelty, change, stimulating and interesting items to explore, look at, and manipulate. They need items which respond to them, which help teach about cause and effect, and develop a child's understanding of themselves and their world. Physically, the child needs the opportunity for mastery and extension of physical skills. Equipment such as climbers, tunnels, pits, slopes, stairs, surfaces at varying levels, push-pull toys, blocks to carry and dump, all provide appropriate challenges for the rapidly growing child.

The purpose of a stimulating, challenging environment for under-threes is to encourage independence and freedom of choice. Staff must, however, recognise

appropriate and reasonable levels of choice. A too-limited range of activities or equipment will result in boredom and frustration. Too great a choice, on the other hand, can offer too many distractions and result in little concentrated effort, with children rushing from one area to the next. In setting up the child care environment, staff should aim to provide an interesting selection of items, which meet the wide range of children's developing skills, and which are accessible, arranged logically and changed regularly. As Jim Greenman has stated, "the play environment should be developed as a wonderful, interesting place that continually captures a child's attention and is laid out to ensure individual and group experiences" (Greenman, 1988: 54).

Small play spaces can encourage positive interaction between groups of two or three children. *(Maitland Child Care Centre)*

In planning for successful group experiences in the under-threes area, staff need to consider the egocentric nature of this age group. A major task for infants and toddlers is to develop socially acceptable ways of interacting with others, and the child care environment should help them in this task. Setting up small play spaces can encourage positive interaction between groups of two or three children, and providing duplicates or triplicates of items can avoid disputes over favourite toys. Conflict is not a suitable challenge for the under-threes.

**In summary, within a consistent, familiar, almost rigid framework, there is the opportunity for novelty, stimulation and challenge. The structure of the environment is unchanging, but the activities, props, songs, stories and materials vary, and provide a breadth of learning experiences.**



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## HOW CAN ORGANISATION OF THE CENTRE HELP MAKE MAXIMUM USE OF MINIMUM STAFF?

It is important, even vital, that the adults who work in child care "have some sense of autonomy in relation to the environment" (Greenman, 1988: 90). Adults need to feel they are doing their job well, and their job, as argued in this booklet, is to do with children. The satisfaction of working in day care comes from having a positive involvement in young children's development, and participating in their emergence into fascinating, skilful, lively, competent, and unique personalities. It doesn't come from moving tables, chairs and beds, being effective packers and stackers, or untiring rearrangers of furniture and equipment.

Margaret Clyde (1988) has suggested that changes to the physical environment can alleviate some of the pressures on child care staff. Similarly, Greenman has written that the child care environment can be "furnished, equipped and organised to maximize the caregiver's time and ease of providing care" (Greenman, 1988: 54). A centre with a visible and logical order will also enable substitute carers or parents to fit in smoothly with the functioning of the room. The question to consider is:

> **How can the child care environment be organised so that the staff are able to spend a maximum amount of time with the children?**

In other words, considering the pressures on centres to work to an efficient budget, which might mean reducing expenditure on staff, how do we make maximum use of minimum staff?

In aiming for the provision of quality care, and quality time for staff interaction with children, it is essential that staff resources are used as effectively and efficiently as possible. The following points are offered for consideration by staff, either as questions about current practices or as suggestions for improvement.

### Rostering of Staff

An effective roster system is one which recognises the needs of staff, children and parents. Essentially it requires centres to take account of the more demanding parts of the day and ensure that staff:child ratios are high during these times. For example, arrival and departure times, although not noted for high numbers of children, require staff to be free to discuss with parents the child's programme for the day and share day-to-day happenings. These are also times of transition when children need extra support from staff. Although actual numbers may be low, these are the times when staff: child ratios should be high. Staff at each centre should ascertain when they need high adult:child ratios, and when a lower number of staff will suffice, in the setting up of effective and responsive roster systems.

### Discipline and Supervision Time

A well-organised environment, which is responsive to toddlers' needs and allows children to choose from a range of interesting and suitable activities, can help take some of the worries out of supervision. As Alice Honig (1988) has stated: "discipline for toddlers may mean arranging the environment so

that no-nos are infrequent". By reducing their role as trouble-shooters, caregivers will have more time for positive interaction with children, for language development, for extension of play and for peaceful, intimate routine care episodes.

## Groups Within Groups

Large numbers of children are not easy to manage and, as many authors would suggest, educationally unsound, especially for the under-threes. Many child care settings, however, require that twenty or more infants and toddlers are cared for in one room. Rather than have all staff attempt to supervise and interact with all children, centres can find ways for staff to work with smaller groups.

Staff should be free to work with small groups of children at regular times during the day. *(Magic Pudding Centre)*

The use of a Primary Caregiver Scheme, for example, in which children are encouraged to relate specifically to one or two particular staff members, gives staff a more realistic number of children to get to know. Another solution is to organise the day's schedule so that children are together in small groups. In this case, sleep patterns or eating habits, age or developmental stage, activity level or ability, are used to group children with a caregiver for certain times during the day. These times can be for special indoor or outdoor play activities, planned learning experiences, early sleep time, quiet time after waking, helping with meal preparation or clearing away, storytime, etc. Groups can use different areas of the room, or separate for indoor and outdoor playtime.

## Make the Most of Routines

Time spent by staff in non-caring activities, such as moving furniture, serving meals, carrying cots or mattresses, setting up beds, clearing up, etc, takes away from the contact time that caregivers have with children. There are two possible answers to this: do less of it, by setting up the equipment in such a way as to minimise the need for daily rearrangement, and/or involve the children, or some of them, in the activity. Involving children in routine tasks may mean that these jobs

take longer, but the positive benefits for staff and children should outweigh the losses in efficiency.

## Consider Time Spent Waiting

Children in child care centres often spend a lot of time waiting. They are asked to wait, for example, to be fed, to go to sleep, to get up after sleep, to get dressed, to use the bathroom, to go outside, even to play. These waiting times, especially for infants and toddlers, cause restlessness and unnecessary discipline problems. Very young children should not have to wait for long periods of time; developmentally, they are not ready for this, and practically, such times can be stressful and cause problems for an already over-stretched staff. It is far better to arrange the day's schedule on the basis of meeting individual needs when they arise, rather than try to force fifteen to twenty youngsters to fit into a rigid routine.

## Equipment and Storage Needs

Equipment for child care centres needs to be considered from two points. First, there needs to be provision for the particular needs of infants and toddlers. Briefly, this means having items which meet toddlers' immediate need for physical activity — for climbing, crawling, and moving in a range of ways and through a number of directions. An indoor climbing structure will prevent the problem of children climbing on the tables or the bookcases (which they will surely do!). Centres also need to ensure that there is enough equipment available so as to prevent disputes over favoured items. Positive use of equipment by toddlers can also be encouraged when staff interact with children during their play.

Open storage shelves within easy reach of adult carers allows equipment to be selected and packed away with a minimum of effort.

*(Hamilton Child Care Centre)*

The second point about equipment concerns storage, and the easy of access that staff have to equipment. Centres need to find ways to reduce the amount of to-ing and fro-ing that staff are required to do when changing activities or setting up furniture for routine care. By ensuring that equipment is close at hand, for example by having toys on open shelves at adult level above the part of the room where it is most likely to be used, or in cupboard units which can be easily opened for children's use, materials can be provided and packed away easily with a minimum of carrying.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:

### CREATING WORKABLE PLACES WHICH MEET THE NEEDS OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS

In setting up a child care environment which recognises and meets the unique characteristics and needs of infants and toddlers, staff should aim to include a number of essential learning areas. Where possible, these learning areas should be distinct, separate, and permanent.

1. **Active Physical Play Area**
   - — meets the young child's need for mobility, in all directions
   - — can give children a new perspective, such as being above the world, observing others, looking up, looking down
   - — requires children to take turns or to wait briefly
   - — allows children to interact with exuberance and energy

2. **Manipulative Play Area**
   - — enables children to find out how things work, to produce effects, to solve problems
   - — develops fine motor and construction skills
   - — can allow children to make independent choices in selecting toys
   - — can help children to take responsibility for restoring order, through learning where items are stored and replacing them after use

3. **Messy Play/Creative Corner**
   - — recognises the child's sensory mode of learning about the world
   - — enables children to explore and experiment with water, paint, paste
   - — allows for social interaction and cooperation
   - — helps children to develop respect for the rights of others

4. **Kitchen/Dramatic Play Area**
   - — encourages the development of a child's sense of self-identity
   - — enables children to take on social roles, to respond to and enact their home experiences
   - — allows children to learn social skills and practise conversational language with peers and with adults

5. **Quiet Play/Music and Story Corner**
   - — recognises the child's need to relax during the child care day and to be cosy with an adult as they would be in their own home
   - — provides an essential 'softness' and comfort in the centre
   - — encourages children's interest in books, pictures, songs, music
   - — allows staff time to assess and develop the child's emerging understandings and skills with language

6. **Personal Storage**

— recognises the child's need to belong, to be seen as an individual
— provides a link between the centre and the home
— encourages the development of independence and self-sufficiency

7. **Curiosity/Sensory Corner**

— recognises the child's need to discover, explore, touch, examine, listen to and experience a wide range of materials, plants and animals

8. **Outside World/Real Life Experiences**

— recognises the special need of the child care child to be part of the everyday world of cleaning, shopping, working, cooking, etc, through visits, excursions and real experiences as well as through books, pictures and imaginary play

9. **Seclusion**

— recognises the child's need for privacy, a place to retreat to, a place to be alone or to escape the busyness and routine of the centre
— provides a place for very small groups to play together

10. **Eating Area**

— allows children to socialise and interact with adults and children in daily routines
— develops self-help skills and independence

11. **Nappy Change Area/Toileting**

— can allow a special one-to-one time for infants and their caregivers, recognising the need for personal attention and affection
— gives the child time to relax and enjoy personal contact, or to look at pictures, mobiles, etc, and be talked to by an adult

12. **Sleep Area**

— recognises the child's need for a familiar sleep space by providing personal items for comfort and security
— can accommodate individual sleep patterns and habits
— should allow early and late sleepers to be placed appropriately
— can include the planning of a quiet activity for early risers

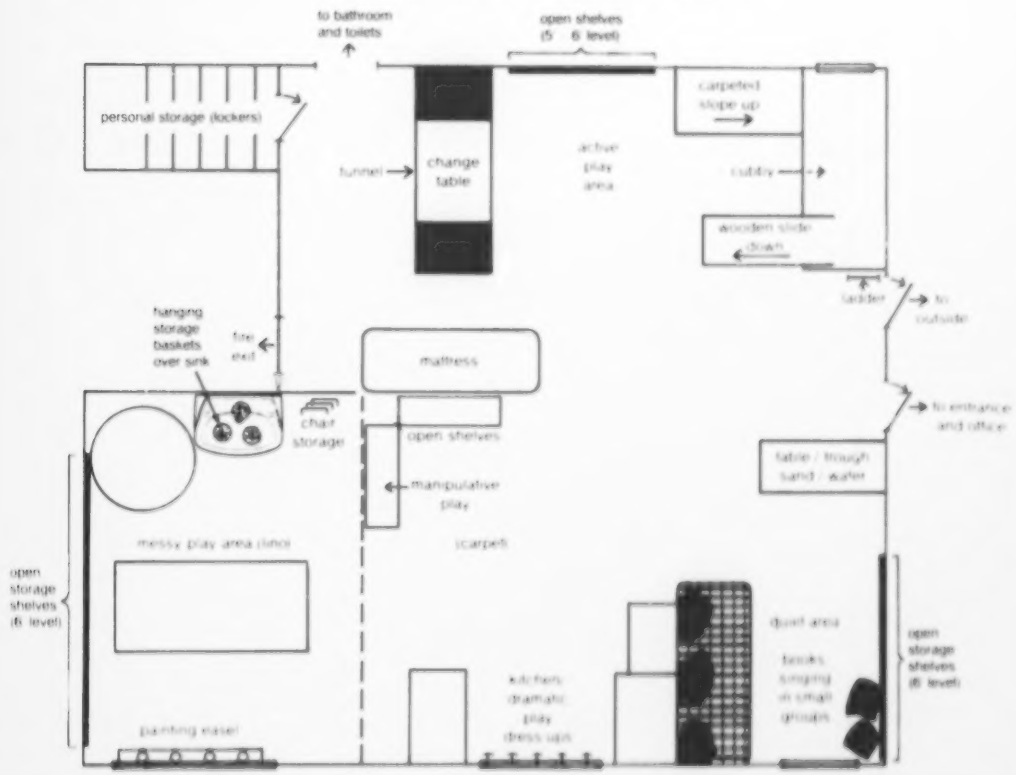
13. **Dressing and Undressing Area**

— recognises the toddler's need to become autonomous and to develop independence in self-help tasks
— allows staff time to give personal and individual attention.

In designing and equipping such learning areas, staff should note that the materials and activities provided in each of these areas will be dependent on the ages and developmental needs of the individual children attending the centre. With non-mobile infants, for example, Cataldo (1983) recommends a selection of rattles and other noise makers in the sensory corner. In the area for physical play, equipment should be arranged to allow for reaching, kicking and grasping, and should include such items as mobiles, bells, toys and interesting washable materials suspended on string or elastic.

The following diagrams illustrate how staff working in an Infant-Toddler Centre operated by the Harvard University Medical Area, in Boston, have provided an educationally appropriate programme for a group of fifteen toddlers. The room includes most of the areas mentioned above, and is set up to minimise the amount of furniture rearrangement during the day. Plan A shows the usual room arrangement for play time.

**Plan A. Room set up for indoor play**




Chairs are stacked to maximise floor space and reduce noise. Hanging baskets over the sink provide storage for painting materials and easy clean-up of painting or pasting activities. High shelves are used to store equipment, and allow easy



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selection of items by staff. The water/sand trough is covered, and doubles as a table, when not being used in the messy play area. Pictures and photographs of the children are stuck on the walls at child's eye level, and are covered with contact to prevent tearing. Open shelves allow children to select from a restricted, yet planned, range of items. A large climbing structure allows children free access to climbing, sliding, and crawling. The cubby underneath is secluded and private. Of major import is the conscious effort by staff to use all floor space for play, and staff-child interaction. Everything at child level is for children. Storage is out of their reach and out of view.

Indoor climbing structures meet toddlers' immediate need for challenging physical activity. *(Harvard Medical Area Child Care)*

Plan B illustrates how the room is adapted for different types of routines, eating, sleeping, dressing and undressing.

The toy cupboard is closed, and the top becomes a surface for storing and serving children's meals. The cupboard is also closed when play time is over and children are being put down to sleep. Mats are arranged around the room according to children's sleep needs. Staff sit next to three or four children where they are able to rub backs or read quietly to help them go off to sleep. Children wake and get up when they are ready, moving to the quiet corner for stories or other activities.

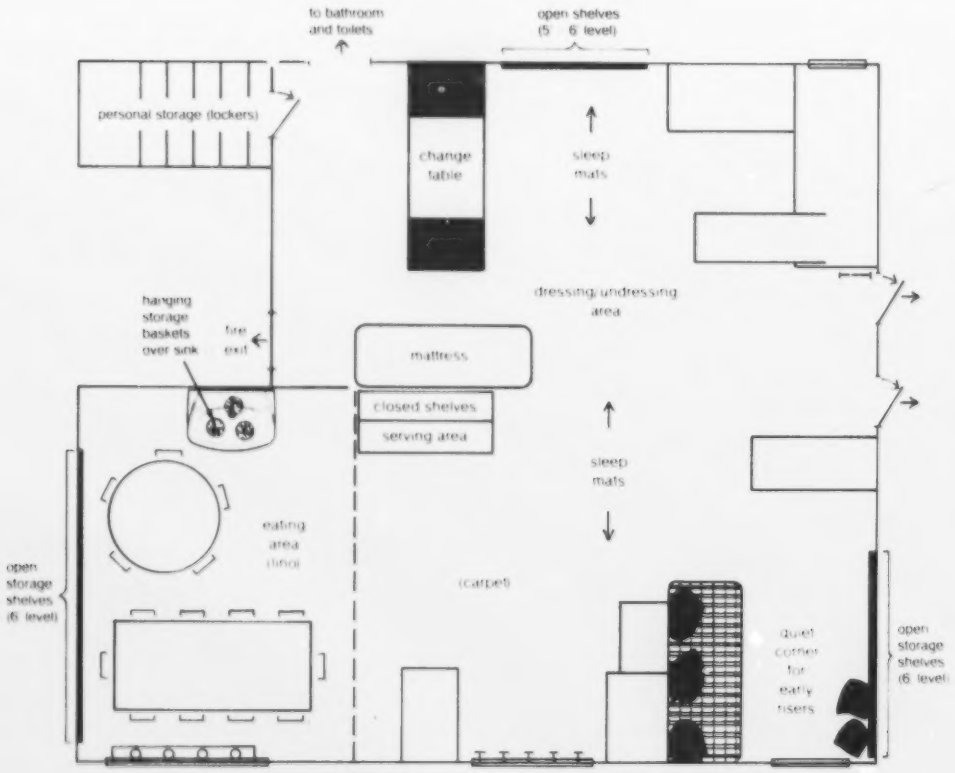
By planning a carefully arranged environment, based on a thorough knowledge of toddler behaviour and development, staff were able to provide individualised care within a group long day care programme. This also occurred in an adjacent room where staff had set up an equally effective environment for babies. The Infant-Toddler Centre was notably different from many other centres in four main ways.

These factors should be considered by all centres aiming to provide good quality care for children under three.

- **The maximisation of playspace, by placing all storage on high shelves and planning for everything at floor level to be available to the children.**
- **The minimisation of furniture and the need to move furniture.**
- **The division of the space into distinct areas for specific types of learning and play activities.**
- **The inclusion of indoor climbing structures.**

In this safe, yet challenging, environment, staff attention to supervision was reduced, and staff and children together benefitted from the enhanced opportunities for positive, relaxed interaction.

**Plan B. Room set up for routine care**



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